

Our Cherry Valley Soldiers - New York, November 1779

A story of Maine men who served at Fort Alden in Cherry Valley, NY on November 11, 1778, when they were attacked by a large force of British Rangers & Iroquois. The event is known as the Cherry Valley Massacre.

Opening Scene

It was a dreary November morning at Fort Alden in the little town of Cherry Valley, NY. A few inches of snow lay on the ground and now a light rain shrouded the landscape with a heavy fog. The men of the 6th (sometimes called 7th) Massachusetts Regiment of the Continental Army went about their normal routines. A few may have been uneasy about the recent news warning of a possible attack, but most felt it was just a rumor - after all, the British Army and the Iroquois didn't fight this late in the season. A few went to the stream to do their laundry. Many officers of the regiment were still enjoying the warmth and dryness of the local residences they used as quarters more than a hundred yards outside the safety of the fort's walls.

Just before noon, some outlying residents heard a shot in the distance. A lone horseman came charging in from the distant fields shouting something. Suddenly through the fog, hundreds of British Rangers and Iroquois Indians came into view, advancing upon the village. The Massacre at Cherry Valley had begun.

Why we care?

I have identified 117 men from Maine that served in the 6th Regiment, out of approximately 300 total men. All but a handful of these Maine men were at Fort Alden on that fateful day.

Background

6th (sometimes called 7th) Regiment

The bulk of the 6th Massachusetts Regiment was formed in late 1776 and early 1777. Most of these men enlisted for 3 years, a few were 9 month or 1 year men, and a few stayed for the duration of the war. The Maine men were concentrated in 4 companies - 43 in Capt. Reed's (he of Topsham), 38 in Capt. Lane's (he of Buxton), 16 in Capt. Ballard's, 16 in Capt. Allen's Company (most of them from Machias), plus 2 other men in two other companies. The majority of the men were from Buxton, Falmouth, Harpswell, Brunswick, Topsham, and Durham. Durham supplied 11 men, 3 in Capt. Lane's Company and 8 in Capt. Reed's.

Col. Ichabod Alden commanded the regiment. They were posted to the Northern Department and joined the main army at Ticonderoga in June of 1777. Some men stated they were at the Battle of Fort Edward on the 29/30th of July. In August, Captain Lane of Buxton was captured by the enemy but won his freedom when Burgoyne surrendered several weeks later. The Battle of Bemis Heights, part of the Saratoga campaign occurred on the 7th of October of 1777. Five Maine men lost their lives there - including Nathan Lewis Sr and Ebenezer Dain, both of Durham.

Prior to Saratoga, we lost two men, probably from disease. After Saratoga, Col. Alden "drew some clothing for ye Regt." and the regiment moved into winter camp at Albany - not at Valley Forge with the main army. Lt. McKendry's journal tells us they moved from camp into town and billeted in local houses during periods of poor weather. They lost an ensign to small pox in December, so the men were marched in small groups to Schenectady for vaccinations over the next few weeks. In April of 1778, men of the regiment may have been guarding Capt. Walter Butler at Albany. Butler, a British Ranger had been caught and sentenced to death as a traitor. His escape around the middle of the month was probably the cause of the death of Private Isaac Crosby of Buxton. Crosby was listed as taken prisoner on the 15th of April and reported killed on the 18th. This escape came back to haunt the regiment, for it was Capt. Walter Butler that led the attack on Cherry Valley.

In May of 1778, Capt. Patrick with a detachment of men was sent to the Schoharie Valley with instructions to "keep continual scouting parties in the adjacent country ... to discover the motions and movements of our enemy". On May 25 the local militia asked for assistance. Capt. Patrick responded by leading 33 of his men out to police the area. A few Iroquois were spotted and followed - despite a suggestion it was a possible trap. Before they knew it, about 300 Iroquois surrounded them. Within a short time, it became a running fight. Before the sun set, Capt. Patrick along with 15 others lay butchered on the ground. There were another 3 wounded and 4 taken prisoner. Among those killed was 13 year old James Barton, Jr. of Harpswell, who enlisted with his father, John Wilson of Buxton, Jonathan Young of Topsham, and Nathaniel Crediford of Machias.

In June another Maine man died, probably from disease. On June 24th Capt. Ballard left Albany with a detachment headed for Cherry Valley. The regiment may have been split up at this time for John Dain's journal briefly describes the Battle of Monmouth on June 28th in New Jersey. A couple other men of the regiment mention they were at the Battle of Monmouth, but most make no mention of it. By the end of July, the majority of the regiment was posted to Cherry Valley.

The Massacre of Cherry Valley

When the 6th Regiment arrived at Cherry Valley, they found the inhabitants living in the church for protection from attack. Col. Alden ordered them to return to their homes. The regiment began building a suitable fort and sending out scouting parties. The fort was complete enough to be christened "Fort Alden" on the 15th of August. The scouting detachments had various small encounters but nothing substantial occurred. Rumors kept coming in about a possible raid on the town. By November, it was believed the season of war had passed and everyone began relaxing. On the 4th the payroll arrived. On the 8th of November fresh rumors of an attack arrived. The townsfolk begged Col. Alden to allow them to move their possessions into the fort for safety. Despite a favorable response from visiting General Hand, Alden refused to allow it. The officers continued to live in the private residences outside the fort. Alden did send out fresh scouting parties along the common routes into town. This move actually backfired and possibly cost him his life.

The morning before the attack, the enemy discovered the scouting party of Sergeant Adam Hunter. All were taken captive, including Samuel Proctor of Falmouth, Enoch Danforth of Brunswick, Joseph Smith of Buxton, and Sergeant Adam Hunter of Topsham. Robert Bray of Harpswell was killed. Someone among them gave up everything to their captors - regiment strength, locations of officer's quarters, etc., greatly facilitating the success of the attack.

On the morning of the attack, a number of Iroquois had silently moved into hiding near the officer's quarters. When the attack began, the officer's ran for the fort. For many it was too far and too late. Col. Alden was cut down as he ran. Approximately 150 Rangers with 50 British regulars attack the fort, but the grapeshot from their cannon repelled the attack. Groups of Iroquois (perhaps as many as 400 warriors total) dispersed throughout the settlement unleashing their fury, killing and destroying everything in their path. The men in the fort were helpless to assist the town. Their leader was dead, they were outnumbered at least two to one if not more, and they had very little ammunition on hand. They had to stand by watching and listening as the town and its inhabitants were destroyed. If not for the cannon, the fort and regiment would have been lost as well.

At least 13 privates lost their lives. All the bodies were mutilated. Four officers were taken captive along with at least 1 sergeant and 10 privates. Of the privates killed and captured - as many as 9 where in the scouting party taken the day before, the others were probably doing their laundry at the stream or on guard at the officer's quarters when the attack began.

It must have been so very demoralizing for our men to stand by helpless. First, the loss of their friends at Cobleskill due to the poor judgment of an inexperienced officer, then they watched as a whole settlement and its inhabitants were destroyed before their eyes. They must have felt betrayed by Col. Alden for not heeding the warnings or perhaps even betrayed by General Washington for not providing them with qualified leaders. The British Rangers added salt to the wound when they captured the regimental colors and burned them in view of the fort.

When the smoke settled, 32 inhabitants (mostly women and children) lay dead or dying, 70 were taken captive, almost all the livestock killed or taken away, and all the buildings except the fort, were burned to the ground.

Aftermath

News

News of the Cherry Valley attack appeared in The Boston Gazette on the 7th of December. Only the officers killed or missing were named. Within days, word would have made it's way to Maine, leaving many families with serious concerns about the fate of their loved ones. Sergeant John Dain returned home on furlough and was in Maine in February. Certainly he shared his sad news with the families of those lost. The families of those killed began the process of grieving. For those taken captive, their families could only pray for their survival and eventual return.

Regiment

The regiment, now under the command of Major Whiting, remained stationed at Cherry Valley until spring. Some men were given furloughs of 40 to 90 days. Two detachments were posted at Fort Herkimer by March, while a few appear to be posted at Albany. It's interesting to note that in mid February two journals mention Capt. Lane began tapping the Sugar Maples. The body of Simeon Hopkins was found "Partely Eate up by wild Beasts". In April Capt. Lane took a

detachment and marched with Col. Van Schaick. They destroyed 3 Iroquois Villages at Onondaga, killing 60 and taking 33 captive without any loss to themselves.

During the summer of 1779 the regiment's spirits may have been lifted as they prepared to join General Sullivan for a retaliatory campaign against the Iroquois. On June 6th new clothing arrived. They set off in mid June and returned in October. But vengeance was not to be sweet for our men. The campaign was ill equipped and short on provisions. They were on 1/2 ration for most of time, filling the gap by scrounging what they could from the Iroquois farmlands before they destroyed them. There were only a couple of brief encounters and a one day battle with the Iroquois, but the hardships of the campaign weighed hard on the men.

For the 6th Regiment, the Sullivan Campaign ended at West Point and they may have remained posted there for the rest of the war. Some of the regiment may have been with Washington's main army in New Jersey, Maryland, and Virginia late 1780 into 1781, but most men of the regiment probably remained at West Point and saw no additional action.

Fate of The Captives

The day after the attack on Cherry Valley, Capt. Butler convinced the Iroquois to release a large number of civilians, but the Rangers kept 2 civilian families to be exchanged for loyalist families held by the Americans. The military prisoners remained with the Iroquois. The captives were taken down the Susquehanna to the Tioga, up the Tioga, across Seneca Lake and down the east side to the village of Kanadaseaga. They traveled a couple hundred miles and arrived at the village late in November. Here the enemy divided the spoils and their prisoners.

On the 12th of the following February (1779) Sergeant Hunter returned after escaping from the village of Oghwaga. He stated Lt. Col. Stacy had been moved to Niagara, while the rest were held among the Iroquois. The officers and several privates were eventually taken to Niagara then Canada where they languished in British prisons until near the end of the war. It appears many of the Cherry Valley men were adopted by the Iroquois, despite a British order forbidding the Iroquois to adopt war prisoners.

Iroquois Captivity

We will never know what the Cherry Valley men really experienced, but I can share with you what others in similar circumstances experienced.

The hardest part of any captivity was surviving the trip back to the village, often hundreds of miles through the wilderness. Captives were made to carry heavy loads, marched hard, treated cruelly, allowed only minimal clothing, seldom had shoes, were severely underfed, and killed if they couldn't keep up. One of the Cherry Valley civilians stated the "Continental soldiers were stripped and drove naked ...". Sergeant Adam Hunter stated he "was stripped of all he had, and was left with barely a blanket ..."

Luke Swetland, a local man held captive from July of 1778 to September of 1779 wrote a memoir of his ordeal. During his first days of captivity his master "went on all the day, doing everything he could invent to torment me." On another day "... I felt a blow on my head, which sidled me out of my path. When I had recovered somewhat, he struck me on the other side of my head, which nearly brought me to the ground. ... I did my best to get out of his way, but he continued following along with kicks and blows, until at last ... [he tired of the game].

Once they arrive at the village, the next ordeal was running the gauntlet. The villagers lined up in two lines facing each other and the captives had to run between the lines while being beaten. Believe it or not, this was a greeting and a chance to see what stuff these new comers were made of. After the gauntlet there would be a great celebration and the surviving captives were adopted into Indian families to replace lost loved ones.

Because the villages were so far into the wilderness, captives seldom considered trying to escape. As an adopted member of a family, they received the clothing, personal tools, and weapons needed to survive. They were treated with fairness and true affection by their new family, generally allowed freedom to come and go as they pleased, and expected to participate in all family activities.

Luke Swetland tells us "I was given to an old squaw as a grandson. She made a great lamentation over me, showing many signs of respect." He goes on "I went visiting often ... Many of them were pleasing, and they tried to learn me." He also says "The Indians were remarkably kind to me and made me a good many presents."

They were generally discouraged from speaking with other captives, but allowed to visit with the Loyalists living among the Indians. The captives were faced with learning a new language and absorbing many new & strange customs. Clothing was an issue for most – Luke Swetland tells us "I was now entirely in Indian dress, ... Not being accustomed to wear breech clouts, I dreaded the cold on my naked thighs, and the house being open and cold, I suffered greatly ..."

The family that adopted Luke consisted of only women. They had no men to hunt meat for them and Luke was not skilled at hunting. In the spring, Luke explains "our corn being nearly all gone, we began to dig ground nuts and gather bass wood buds. Later we made some sugar. Wood betony sprang up early, which I ate with sugar. This, with some other weeds and nuts, was our main support until about July, when we had some dead horse, which I though was the best meat in the world."

Luke attempted to escape several times, but was so weak from lack of proper diet that he turned back before any one discovered what he was up to. In late April Luke heard of the attack at Onondaga and later a soldier taken prisoner gave him word of the invasion General Sullivan was preparing. He tells us "This gave me new hope of deliverance."

Freedom

I was only marginally successful in learning the final outcome of our regiment's captives.

Samuel Woodsum of Saco was in the scouting party captured the day before. He was eventually taken to Niagara where he remained until spring. He was then moved to Quebec and held in British prisons until the end of the war.

Ensign Andrew Garrett of Boston stated he "remained a prisoner three years, one of which was with the Indians".

Isaac Parmeter of Brookfield, MA was kept by the Indians 11 months then given to the British where he remained 13 months before he was exchanged.

Privates did not get credit for time as a prisoner. Abijah Additon is listed as prisoner taken on the scout the day before the attack, but he never lost a day's pay according to surviving documents. Perhaps he was sent back with the released civilians or escaped soon after his capture.

Sergeant Adam Hunter of Topsham escaped and returned to his regiment on the 12th of February 1779.

Ira Johnson of Brookfield, MA returned to duty 22-Apr-1779. Lt. McKendry's journal says "This day Ira Johnson arriv'd in Fort Alden, ran from the Indians". He was sent to fetch corn for his Indian family and when he realized he was within 20 miles of Continental troops, he "in the night ran from the Indian that he was with". He informed them the officers were well ... "the rest of the prisoners were scattered among ye Indians."

Epriam Dutton of Westford, MA was with the Indians and gained his freedom in October of 1779. He was back on the payroll for the year 1780. His release occurred during the time of the Sullivan campaign and perhaps was a result of it. Period documents demonstrate several captives did gain their freedom during the confusion and panic caused by the campaign. Unfortunately, none of our regiment's POWs are mentioned, leaving us only with speculation.

Samuel Proctor of Falmouth (later Lewiston) was in the scouting party captured the day before the attack. He was back on the rolls for the year 1780, serving out the last year of his enlistment.

Enoch Danforth of Brunswick was back on the rolls for the year 1780. Like Ephraim Dutton and Samuel Proctor, he may have gained his freedom during the Sullivan Campaign.

Joseph Smith of Buxton may have died in captivity or perhaps chose to stay with his Indian family. I found no additional information for him. However, because of his very common name, I could not devote much time to looking for him.

Soldier Morale

John Dain's Journal

During his time in service as an orderly sergeant, John Dain of Durham kept a journal. Much of this journal has survived and is currently held at the Maine Historical Society. Most pages contain military items of little interest to ordinary folks, but there are surviving pages that provide a brief glimpse of other matters.

John's entry for the attack states;

"this Morning About ten a Clock the Enemy Surrounded the Fort the Number of them we Cannot tell We think thare Was between Seven or Eight hundred of them Endion and torey's In the first phase they Killed the Cheaf Col. and took the Left. Col. Prisoners And Likewise Left. holden Ensign Garrett and the Doctors mate Prisoners With them - Samuel procter, Samuel Woodsum Charls hudman and Joseph Smith that Went outt A Scoutt the Day before this was took Prisoners With them likewise Was a Good many more belonging to sd Redgt the Enemy Is Killed A Good maney of our men Which we have found all Readey beside Sevearl more missing all thay Killed Belonging to our Regt thay used in the Most Barbou's Maner And Also all the Enhabbitance Men Women and Children thay Used in the same Manner."

An item found in this journal that is of great importance to genealogists and descendants was a Power of Attorney by Samuel Proctor Sr. of Falmouth to John Dain copied into his book. It states that John is the son-in-law of Samuel Sr.. This provides a missing link, not found in local vital records - John Dain's wife, Betty Proctor, was a sister to Samuel, Thomas, and Joseph Proctor, all known in Durham.

In this Power of Attorney, Samuel Sr. allows John to act for him in recovering any personal property of his son and to collect any unpaid wages, since they had no way of knowing if Samuel Jr was still alive. The item about personal property may have been included because the regiment had auctioned off items belonging to the men killed at Cobleskill.

Effects of the Sullivan Campaign

General Sullivan's army was not well clothed, and certainly not prepared for a campaign that could extend into the fall season. Only one in twelve men carried a blanket.

Joshua Moody of Buxton tells us he marched from "Ft. Stanwick in pursuit of the Indians ... [through the] Seneca Country" into Pennsylvania then "... through the Jerseys to West Point".

In 1781, John Dain wrote "By request of Gen. Sullivan ... we agreed to draw only 1/2 allowance, to lengthen out our provisions." He goes on to describe the route they took, then upon returning from the campaign states "... Our regiment was put into winter quarters, but the barracks being full, there was no room for us. It was a hard cold winter. We had to bring in wood 1-1/2 miles from Rock Mt. being a hard service indeed, this in addition to the hardships ... from the middle of June to Oct. with only one suit of clothes, in the wilderness without houses or tents, only the heavens to cover our heads, and this only a part of the hardships our soldiers met with. Numbers died on the march for want of food, and those who lived through it never received their retained rations, nor clothes ... This was the way the soldiers were wronged."

After serving short enlistments in Maine and Boston, John Dain's final enlistment had gotten off to a rocky start. He tells us Capt. Daniel Lane asked him to recruit for the company and promised him an Ensign's commission. John raised about 20 men and marched them to Cambridge only to find Lane had given the appointment to another man. He had to settle for a sergeant's rank and it seemed to go downhill from there. So many men lost in the ambush at Cobleskill and the massacre at Cherry Valley for want of good leadership. The Sullivan campaign seems to have been the final straw for John - he did not re-enlist! He goes on to say "was discharged ... Returned without money and on charity of the people."

Daniel Ridley of Harpswell tells us he "obtained a furlough ... for forty days with permission to return home on account of my want of clothing, having just returned from the Indian expedition under General Sullivan". Now, with clothing so poor Daniel could not perform his duties, he had to make his way home with little or no money.

In 1780 John Dain hired a lawyer to assist him to recover what was due him. In 1781 Dain says he never received "the 4£ 103 endorsed on our bounty notes when receiving our guns and equipment". He also claimed the State Treasury still owed him and "In regard to our pay in continental money, it had so depreciated that when I was discharged ... a months' pay would not buy a meal in some places. ... My goods were burned while I was in the army also lost my health and land by depreciation of money."

Forty years after his discharge, Cornelius Keith of Georgetown tells us he is still waiting for his final wages.

A bitter ending for brave men that endured the hell of war.

Closing Statement

This evening I hope I have awakened a memory of these brave men. By providing the DAR and Androscoggin Historical Society with a written version of this presentation, perhaps we can assure their sacrifice will never again be forgotten.